

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510
(202) 224-6342

The Honorable Debra Lee James
Secretary
Department of the Air Force
1690 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Secretary James,

Prior to his confirmation vote, I had a lengthy discussion with Secretary of Defense Carter about the future of the 440th Airlift Wing at Pope Army Airfield. I also raised the issue publicly with Secretary Carter during his hearing. He publicly committed to look into the matter and sit down and discuss the 440th's future with me.

With that in mind I am distressed that in spite of Secretary Carter's commitment, the Air Force leadership is proceeding to this matter before he has even had time to fulfill his public assurance.

First, the Carl Levin National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), requires the Air Force to report to the Congress on the service's future C-130 force structure. Congress is then be given sixty days to respond to that report. That report was due to be delivered in January yet it has not been officially approved by your office or that of the Chief of Staff, much less provided to Congress as required by the NDAA. My understanding is that the report ill-advisedly calls for the dismantling of the 440th.

Second, in contravention of the spirit of the NDAA, the Air Force has already begun removing airmen from the 440th --before the report has even been provided to Congress, much less before Congress has an opportunity to respond. The command recently held an all hands meeting to help airmen look for other jobs. If the Air Force has not reached a decision on the future of the 440th why are airmen at Pope being told to transfer elsewhere?

I understand there is an internal struggle within the Air Force as to the meaning of the "total force"—the proper mix of active Guard and Reserve forces. Unfortunately it appears that the decision to "grow" the active force while "sustaining" the Guard and Reserve means that "active associated" reserve units like the 440th will be retired to preserve "active" units in parts of the country where those "active" units do not have the day to day tactical missions that are unique to the 440th. That appears to be contrary to and an official reversal of the conclusions of The National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force.

Pope AAF is the busiest airfield in the world for the performance of training requiring tactical airlift. Since 1954, the primary Air Force clients have been the XVIII ABN CORPS, 82nd ABN and the Army Special Forces Groups stationed at Fort Bragg. This is not a parochial issue, deactivating the 440th is a tactical and strategic mistake that will impact the readiness of America's rapid reaction and Special Forces. It essentially takes the "air" out of "airborne".

The removal of the 440th AW at Pope Army Airfield creates unreasonable risks to the readiness of these critical airborne units, many of which must be prepared to respond to a range of contingencies on short notice. Moreover, the anticipated deactivation of the 440th AW would come at a time when the nation

is facing growing uncertainty abroad that could require a military response—a response that only forces at Fort Bragg can provide.

The 440th AW is the only Air Force Reserve C130-H wing co-located with the XVIII Airborne Corps, specifically the 82nd Airborne Division's Global Response Force brigades and elements of United States Special Operations Command and Joint Special Operations Command. Over the last seven years, the 440th AW has provided the Army with unparalleled, tailored, training opportunities without the 'tyranny of distance' created by bureaucratic, logistical and operational delays or cancellations.

Air Force leadership has stated that after any deactivation of the 440th AW, out of state aircraft would support all airlift requirements for Bragg units at Pope AAF. Since Pope AAF is the busiest airfield in the world for joint training missions requiring tactical airlift, we view such a substitution as wholly inadequate, inefficient, and shortsighted. Furthermore, it is our position that the accessibility, flexibility, certainty, and short turnaround the 440th AW provides to the Army Airborne and Special Operation Forces greatly outweighs any potential cost savings from consolidation in light of the greater expense of using of aircraft from distant airbases.

Air Force decision makers should also consider that the complete departure of locally assigned aircraft from Pope—which appears to be taking place now--would likely be a "one way door," with little option for them to return due to cost if it is discovered later that this TDY based support plan is unworkable and unsustainable from an operational perspective. Departure of the indigenous Pope aircraft will degrade the existing facilities which will lead to a strategic problem in regard to emergency deployments as needed.

The men and women of the 440th AW have nurtured a close, professional relationship with the Army rank and file and senior leaders in the airborne units at Fort Bragg and provided them with unparalleled access to routine and unique training opportunities to maintain readiness and hone skills in anticipation of a range of contingencies.

Would you please advise me as the extent to which the Air Force is reducing or impacting the mission of the 440th—prior to the Air Force providing the legally required report to Congress regarding the service's C-130- force structure including the 440th. The intent of requiring the report was to give Congress time to evaluate the recommendations before the Air Force implemented them. It appears that the Air Force's actions would deny Congress that prerogative.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thom Tillis".

Thom Tillis

cc: The Honorable Ashton Carter

The Honorable John McCain

The Honorable Jack Reed